

Minutes
Community Voices/Budget Choices Facilitation Committee
May 29, 2008

The committee met at the Town Room, Town Hall. The meeting was called to order at 9:05 a.m.

Alison Donta-Venman, Katherine Vorwerk Feldman, Stanley Gawle, Martha Hanner, Gerald Jolly, Janet Lansberry, Irvin Rhodes, Bob Saul, and Richard Spurgin were present from the committee, as was Andrew Steinberg, Budget Coordinating Group liaison to the committee.

Jere Hochman (Superintendent) was also present.

Agenda

1. Presentation by Jere Hochman about his experience with successful community processes and the information the BCG received from Rod Wright
2. Decision about whether we want to ask Wright to meet with us, in person or by phone, scheduling
3. Further discussion of the data needs, focused around revising and then adopting the Donta-Venman's draft
4. Review the time line/work plan
5. Approval of minutes, May 15 and May 21
6. Consideration of how the committee will function – subcommittees, chair, support.

Steinberg chaired the meeting by agreement of the committee. Due to the time constraints, the committee addressed agenda items 1, 2, and 4, postponing discussion of the remaining agenda.

The meeting began with a continuation of the discussion from the prior meeting about the committee charge. There was agreement that the charge is to develop a proposed long-term plan that reflects what it hears from the community. Gawle pointed out that there has to be a process to set priorities. Hard choices need to be made; the continued use of reserves is not a long-term plan. Rhodes observed that we cannot present scenarios without budgets attached to them. Lansberry said that the committee needs to make a recommendation and get “push back.” Vorwerk Feldman pointed out that the committee needs broad input, and should conduct outreach to inform the community and obtain input.

Hochman explained how the schools are developing scenarios, including how they define “level services.” He then described enhancements, such as adding language programs that have been identified as community priorities. Discussion continued briefly before Hochman presented an overview of public engagement processes for planning.

He set the context by describing the district where he was Superintendent before coming to Amherst. There, school districts are independent taxing authorities and must gain support for taxes and bond issues, for capital construction. It isn't possible to present a tax issue every year, so districts must plan on a multi-year basis, ideally five years, and obtain public input in order to present a tax levy request that will be supported. They used a combination of focus groups to

reach targeted groups, market research, and large meetings to assure that they heard from the community. The goals were to find out what the community wants and values, and what people will support. This is a process of obtaining public permission to provide what is needed. Furthermore, people will not support what they don't understand, and resist a "top down" approach.

Hochman suggested that the public needs to be presented with pictures of the future, and the committee needs to get feedback on them. It is therefore a two-step process, to get feedback on the ideas and then to determine what the public wants and will support.

Lansberry asked whether the time frame outlined for the process is reasonable. Hochman responded that he now believes that it may be too fast. The schools will not have scenarios available until late in July. The committee will need to think about the process, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The committee recognized that the public will have questions that need to be answered, and it needs to anticipate them. An example discussed was to assure that efficiency has been sought and achieved. Lansberry asked for information about the process of determining appropriate salaries. Hochman described the process used in the schools, where there are seven bargaining units.

Returning to the Community Voices/ Budget Choices process, the logical steps are to develop pictures of the future, get the public's input on them, and put together a proposal for a multi-year plan. A consultant can advise on the process and, if desired, help to facilitate it. Hochman will ask Rod Wright, whom he knows from Missouri and advised the BCG, to come back to Amherst to meet with the committee.

The committee did not set a firm meeting date for June 5, but will hold the time if a meeting is appropriate.

The meeting adjourned at 11:00 a.m.

Andrew Steinberg, acting clerk